WHOSE LAST, BEST HOPE
Luke 4:16-21
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

They called him a revolutionary, I suppose: a radical, a troublemaker. The custodians of the status quo were alarmed by what he was saying; so alarmed that they overlooked the fact that he was a son of Nazareth. They knew him. They had watched him "grow in wisdom and stature." They were fond of his parents, their neighbors. But they forgot all that in their anger and frustration. He managed to so enfuriate the power brokers in Nazareth with his first public utterance that he barely escaped the incident with his life.

What had he done? How had he managed to precipitate this serious crisis? He simply had read their own scripture to them. He had gone to the synagogue on the Sabbath in his home town, and when he was invited to be a reader he had chosen a portion of the book of Isaiah which describes what it will be like when God reigns fully on earth, when the Kingdom comes.

> Good news for the poor, he said,
> Liberty for the captives and
> Sight for the blind and
> Freedom for the oppressed.

They knew the passage, obviously. It may have been the prescribed reading for the day. And so the words themselves were not the reason for their anger. It was, we deduce, his subsequent suggestion that the time had come for the ideas to live. It was his suggestion that these soaring abstractions which could lift a person's spirit, were not incarnate in the way they were living.

The Bible is partial to the poor. From beginning to end there is a definite tilt in the Bible in the direction of the underdog, the outcast, the forgotten, the oppressed. You can ignore it only by the most blatant selectivity in reading. Social change, social justice, economic justice, political justice, are tied to belief in God in the Old Testament and discipleship to his Son in the New Testament. And that relationship is one of the dynamics which is informing, disturbing, and instructing the church today.

But on this day I am most interested in the curious yet hauntingly familiar dynamic of a people's anger at being reminded of their best, noblest traditions. Jesus did it all his life. It is certainly one of the reasons he was crucified. He insisted that his people be accountable to their own traditions, their own law, their own identity, as God's special people.

It seemed to me a provocative dynamic as we observe the founding of our republic on this day. The Fourth of July, particularly when it falls on a Sunday, is a most appropriate occasion to think about and celebrate our best ideas as they were embodied in a revolution and a war two centuries ago. And to inquire, at least, as to their health in our generation.

The average age of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence was under thirty. They were not wise old patricians. They were impatient, young radicals who had a vision of what human life could be and what prevented it from realizing its full potential. The vision was strongly Biblical. It had to do with liberty, justice, safety, security. When they gathered in Philadelphia in the decade after the war to write a constitution, they said in the Preamble what the vision was in essence...

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the General Welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution..."

The vision is there from the beginning.....Justice - Tranquility - Common Defence - General Welfare - Liberty - .

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson thought about the whole incredible sequence of events for decades after the fact. Fortunately some of the correspondence survives. In a letter to Jefferson, written 35 years after the war, Adams said:

"The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people.....The radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution." (Theology Today, John Mulder, July 1976)

Bruce Catton described it clearly: "Men and women did not propose to be bossed around any longer, and at the same time they did not propose to go hungry or live in want or feel the restraints of a tightly ordered society....They saw liberty, not as a glorious abstraction, but as something that began with what the citizen had for breakfast...." (American Heritage, June 1976, P. 4)

A modern scholar, Robert Bellah, focusses on the idea of Covenant as the dynamic which enlivened the vision: the "General Welfare" mentioned in the preamble to the constitution. There was something for which governments and nations existed, they suggested, other than the privilege of the few, the freedom of the aristocracy and the landowners, namely the Common Welfare.

It was, perhaps, their best, most revolutionary idea. They were not naively optimistic about the human condition, by the way. They were influenced by a Calvism which featured a healthy sense of sin. Some of them called it total depravity. Others concluded that, left to their own devices, people can make a mess of almost any human endeavor. They didn't trust power at all...the power of the crown, the power of the church, the power of the military establishment; the power of commercial interests. They would have been appalled not only at the size of the Federal government, but at General Motors, Bechtel, ITT, or the city of Chicago. Again, the correspondence between Adams and Jefferson is instructive. Adams observed, "Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all his laws." (op. cit., Theology Today).

They were realistic about the human condition. But they continued to hold to their vision. They believed that they were in touch with something very important; that this new republic would be the fertile ground out of which a new humanity would grow. Their profound hope is repeated in an obscure latin phrase on the dollar bill, just below the eye of God - "Novus Ordo Seclorum" - "A New Order for the Ages." They believed it was their destiny to demonstrate that a society could, in fact, be free: that people could live in peace and charity with one another, equal in opportunity; they believed that it was God's will that they demonstrate how justice is applied to all. They set in motion a system that values truth so much it protects the rights of its own critics from within, a conviction practiced nowhere else in history with the commitment it receives here..., for the first fragile right to be sacrificed by tyranny of the right or left is public dissent. They believed in principles which, a century later, would call the nation to account for its own failure, the massive sin of slavery. They believed that what they were doing was their destiny, God's will for them.

The flaw in the system, however, is that the very freedom the republic guarantees, can be used for very narrow purposes. The flaw in the system is that the altruism of one generation can become selfishness and greed in the next. There is no guarantee that the vision will go on living within the system. The guardians of the status quo in Nazareth, remember, simply couldn't abide their own ancient hope.

The French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville, enchanted by the American experiment, nevertheless saw the flaw in 1835. "No power on earth can prevent the increasing equality of conditions from leading every member of the community to be wrapped up in himself.....And no one can foretell into what disgrace and wretchedness they would plunge themselves lest they should have to sacrifice something of their own well-being to the prosperity of their fellow citizens." (Sydney Mead, The Lively Experiment, p. 85).

With an amazing unanimity the historians, the scholars, who take the long view of things, conclude that when people lose their important, essential principles, their commitment to a big cause outside themselves, they begin to turn inward, to withdraw inside the perimeters of their own lives, to look and sound selfish.

Sydney Mead, for instance, writes that "When people lose a sense of direction and therefore of hope,...when they lose belief in the great experiment, they are apt to turn with some hysteria to tangible, technical guarantees of security, to attempt to freeze and preserve what they have." (ibid., p. 85)

Arnold Toynbee and Bruce Catton both believed that the American revolution goes on without us, elsewhere, the leadership falling into other hands. The American Revolution continues, they suggested, wherever people are struggling to be free, free from the same sort of restraints that motivated the colonists to become revolutionaries: oppression, limitations on personal liberty, hunger, fear. Why, of all the people in the world, do we Americans have such trouble giving the Communists the credit when the people of El Salvador insist on the rights we once called unalienable, or the people of South Africa insist on the right to vote, to be represented, to live where they wish and participate in the life of their own nation?

Within the system major changes are affecting the very nature of the republic. It is a matter for continuing reflection and debate, but obviously the government has pulled back significantly from direct involvement in the pursuit of the common good. It may be a creative maneuver. Less federal government involvement in matters of justice, equality, common welfare, may in fact stimulate sufficient local initiative to deal even more effectively with the problems. In fact, that is precisely what has happened in some instances. The people of Franklin County gave a half million cans of food to hungry neighbors recently. That's good.

The shift of responsibility has a price tag, however, and, it is my deepening conviction that the church's role in all of this is not so much to advocate one position or the other as it is to keep an eye on the price. It has a way of getting forgotten. It is not, in the final analysis, a matter of theological significance whether the federal government, or the county, deals with the problems of the unemployed poor in our neighborhood. It is a matter of theological significance, however, that the poor be dealt with and not lost in the shuffle, that we not simply forget about the devastating unemployment which is a result of shifts which barely inconvenience the privileged.

The pain is not imaginary. The dramatically increased lines at our Food Pantry and at the doors of the church, and on the phones all day, asking for help, is blunt testimony to human pain. Ending federal responsibility and involvement is not, I would submit, an inherently good thing, unless someone, somewhere else in the system picks up the slack.

The Wall Street Journal reports the facts every morning. Fewer dollars for Federal Mine Inspectors result in a significant increase in mine accidents. May 27, first column: fewer dollars for inspection, regulation, and treatment, result in an immediate and alarming increase in the incidents of lead poisoning in urban infants and children.

I do not believe that the Republican Party or the Democratic Party has the whole truth, or the divinely inspired program. I do not believe business has the whole truth any more than I expect the whole truth from labor. I can't believe that the Washington Post slants its news any more or less than Dow Jones publications. What I believe is that when self interest is the primary motivator, truth first, and justice second, are the casualties. What I do believe the New Testament teaches and our history confirms is that our own best traditions constitute a vision significantly bolder and bigger and more courageous than anyone has been willing to risk in recent years.

What we need is Lincoln'c profound perception of this last best hope which we can nobly preserve or meanly lose. What we need is a rebirth, literally, a conscious resurrection of big principles we are too willing to sacrifice. I found a new name for it recently: a "sense of the green," not as in greenback - we never lost that - but as in the "village green". It comes from the president of the National Urban Coalition. A time essay I clipped a while ago quoted him to the effect that early New England towns set aside some land in the center to be held in common. The village green was a very important symbol, he maintained, not only functionally but for the commonality, the sense of corporate ownership, and responsibility for the common life which it symbolized. "Today", he said, "people have difficulty feeling that they have things in common, that there are group interests that override individual needs."

A "sense of the green" would help, indeed: a sense that old ideas of melting pot, of equal opportunity, of economic and political and social justice, are still very powerful ideas and that in much of the world, particularly the emerging third world, men and women love those ideas so much they are willing to die for them. We used to believe them to be true. We used to believe that human beings are at their best when they willingly take care of one another, when compassion and a willingness to bear the burdens of another are revived as virtues not weakness. We used to believe that all the elements of this system are designed to and operate best when submitted to the common good. In the midst of a time that has treated visions very roughly we need nothing so much as a rebirth of hope and confidence and a renewal of those radical ideas we cllebrate today.

The Christian faith, after all, has taught consistently that God's kingdom is characterized by some of those very ideas: justice, kindness, sacrifice, dignity. It is wrong to identify God's kindgom with any earthly system but it is not wrong to acknowledge that at our best we have tried to make those ideas into political and social realities.

The danger is always that we, like the keepers of the status quo in Nazareth, will be so pierced by our own best principles that we will turn faith inward, or strike out at the one who reminds us and calls us to account. That, we can count on Jesus Christ to do. To accept, forgive, and save us, but not without first reminding us of our noblest traditions and showing us what we could be. AMEN.